

## Article

# Taking the Deer by the Antlers: Deer in Material Culture in the Balkan Neolithic

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**Abstract:** Prehistoric communities had strong ties with the animal world that surrounded them—animals were prey, sources of food, and raw materials, but also threats and mysteries, and certain animals often had an important place in the symbolic realm. With the process of domestication and the switch to animal husbandry as the main source of animal food, these relations changed considerably, and a certain dichotomy between “the domestic” and “the wild” may be noted in numerous past communities. When it comes to the Neolithic period in the Balkans, domestic animals had an important place in subsistence and economy, and it seems that cattle had a particularly prominent symbolic role. Wild species preserved some of their significance in both subsistence and symbolic realms, especially cervids (red deer, roe deer, and fallow deer). In this paper, the place of deer in the material culture of the Neolithic communities in the Balkans will be analysed: skeletal elements of deer were used for the production of diverse items, including non-utilitarian ones, or were part of ritual depositions, and deer representations are encountered in other materials, such as clay figurines. The symbolic meaning of deer cannot be reconstructed with certainty; however, it is probable that deer were tied with territoriality and the landscape.

**Keywords:** animal symbolism; deer representations; antler objects; Neolithic; Balkan



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## 1. Introduction

Prehistoric communities had strong ties with the animal world that surrounded them—animals were sources of food, raw materials, and work forces, but also could have been threats, mysteries, and allies, and certain animals often had an important place in the symbolic realm. Diverse groups of animals were ascribed symbolic roles, such as the role of ancestors, message carriers, and links with other (mythic) worlds, and were assigned certain value and importance, either positive or negative. Those symbolic roles and values may be related to their place in economy, their major habitat (land, water, woods, etc.), their behaviour (such as aggressive, predatory animals, or those that are hidden, hard to capture), or other behavioural or physical traits (cf. [Oma 2010](#); [Pasarić 2014](#); [Russell 2012](#); [Ryan and Crabtree 1995](#)).

The Neolithic period brought in drastic, important changes in virtually all aspects of human daily and ritual lives; and the process of domestication, the shift to animal husbandry as the main source of animal food, along with the sedentary way of life, also deeply transformed human–animal relations ([Marciniak 2005](#); [Pasarić 2014](#); [Russell 2016](#)). Hunters tend to relate to animals as equals, and to engage in personal relationships with their prey or its spirit, whereas herders protect and care for the animals. Herding also brought in changes in the organisation of labour, and sedentism created stronger ties with the local environment ([Russell 2016](#)). The Neolithic is also the time when separated categories of wild and domestic were created, and certain dichotomies between “the domestic” and “the wild” may be noted in numerous past communities, including the Early Neolithic ones ([Hodder 1990](#); [Russell 2022](#)). Nerissa Russell, who analysed the human–animal relations among the earliest Neolithic communities in south-western Asia, noted that wild animals dominated the symbolic sphere of myth and ritual ([Russell 2016](#), p. 24).

She also argued that wild and domestic animals were indeed treated differently, and that a wild/domestic conceptual distinction existed (Russell 2022).

When it comes to the Neolithic period in the Balkans, domestic animals (sheep, goats, cattle, and pigs) had a significant place in subsistence and the economy (e.g., Bulatović 2018; Orton 2008; Russell 1993). There is abundant evidence that cattle also had a prominent symbolic role (Spasić 2012, 2015; Vitezović 2015). Wild species, however, preserved some of their importance in both the subsistence and symbolic realms, and the aim of this paper is to show how their significance and value are visible within material culture.

In particular, deer stand out among wild species. Red deer was the most frequently hunted species (Greenfield 2008; Orton 2008; Russell 1993), and deer species (red deer, roe deer, and fallow deer) were important as both a source of food and raw materials (Vitezović 2014, 2017). In this paper, the evidence for the symbolic role of deer in the material culture of the Neolithic communities will be analysed. The evidence consists of two aspects: skeletal elements of deer were used for the production of non-utilitarian items, or were part of ritual depositions; and deer representations existed in other materials—as decorations on vessels, or self-standing clay figurines. Evidence is not abundant, especially in comparison with the evidence regarding the symbolic importance of cattle (see Spasić 2012, 2015), but is still continuous throughout the Neolithic period in the Balkan area.

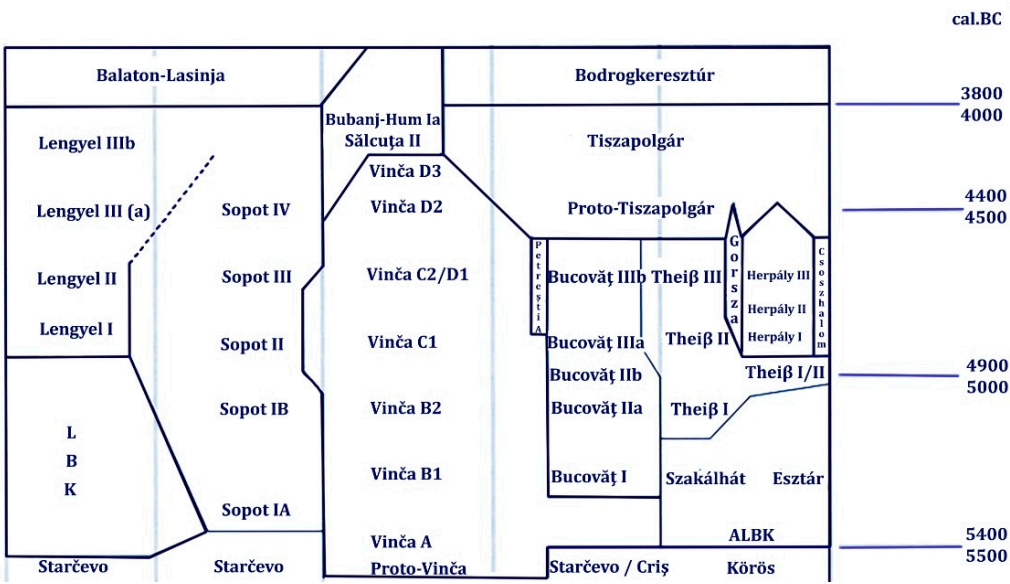
## 2. The Neolithic in the Balkans

The archaeological evidence included here is focused on the regions of the central Balkans and the southern Carpathian basin and adjacent areas, i.e., roughly in the present-day state of Serbia and to a lesser extent neighbouring areas.<sup>1</sup> The Neolithic communities in south-eastern Europe are traditionally defined as parts of specific cultures or cultural groups, which were closely connected and shared numerous common traits, but also displayed regional differences and variations (Garašanin 1979; Whittle 1985).

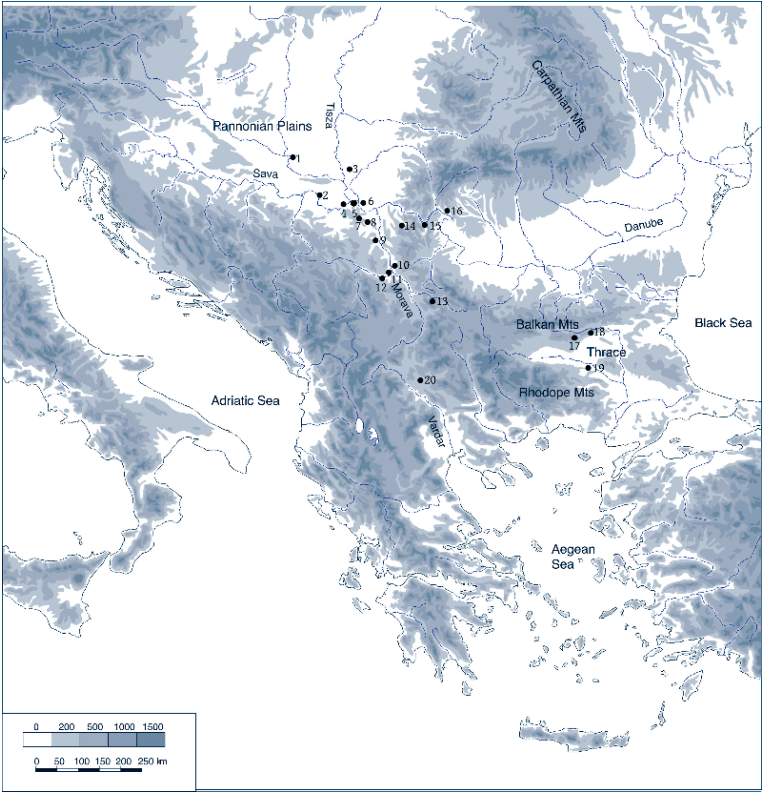
In the Early and Middle Neolithic, the Starčevo–Körös–Criş cultural complex was the predominant cultural phenomenon widespread in present-day Serbia, Hungary, Romania, north-eastern Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro, with its regional variants—the Starčevo culture in Serbia, Croatia, and adjacent areas; Criş in Romania; and Körös in Hungary (Garašanin 1979; Šošić Klindžić and Hršak 2014). Absolute dates place the Starčevo culture in the period between 6200 and 5500 BCE (Whittle et al. 2002) (Figures 1 and 2). The Starčevo–Körös–Criş cultural complex is very close to other cultural complexes of south-eastern Europe, and according to some authors, this cultural complex, defined broadly, also encompasses the Proto-Sesklo culture of northern Greece, the Anzabegovo–Vršnik culture in Northern Macedonia, and the Čavdar–Kremikovci–Karanovo culture in Bulgaria (Minichreiter 2007, p. 14; Šošić Klindžić and Hršak 2014, p. 15), and is sometimes labelled as the First Temperate Neolithic (Nandris 1970).

The Late Neolithic in these areas is marked by the Vinča culture—it included the areas in present-day Serbia, parts of Romania, eastern Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro (Garašanin 1979), in the period 5400/5300–4500/4450 BCE (Borić 2009; Tasić et al. 2015) (Figures 1 and 2). The area of eastern Croatia was also occupied by the communities of the Sopot and Lengyel cultures (Balén and Čataj 2014; Težak-Gregl 2014). According to M. Garašanin (1979), the Vinča culture was a part of the Balkan–Anatolian complex of the Late Neolithic, close to other cultures and cultural groups in the region, including Karanovo III in Bulgaria, the Butmir culture in Bosnia and Herzegovina, etc.

The Neolithic in Bulgaria is usually interpreted in relation to the stratigraphic sequence investigated at the tell site of Karanovo, situated in central Bulgaria, near Nova Zagora (see Boyadzhiev 2009). V. Nikolov labelled Early Neolithic as Karanovo I–II, Middle Neolithic as Karanovo II–III, and Late Neolithic as Karanovo III and IV (Nikolov 1995, 1998). On the other hand, H. Todorova and I. Vaysov offered a classification of the Neolithic in Bulgaria and neighbouring regions into two blocks, Balkan Early Neolithic block (BEN) and Balkan Late Neolithic and Early Eneolithic block (BLN–BEE), each with subphases (Todorova and Vaysov 1993, pp. 740–83).

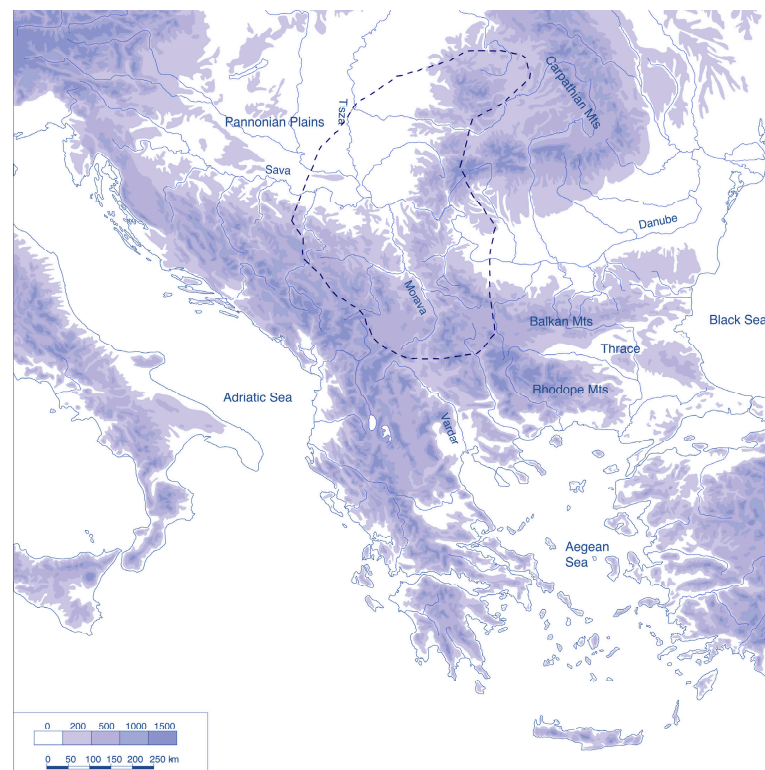


**Figure 1.** Relative and absolute chronology for the Neolithic period in the region (adapted after Botić 2016).



(a)

**Figure 2.** Cont.



(b)

**Figure 2.** (a) The most important sites mentioned in the text: (1) Donja Branjevina, (2) Gomolava, (3) Opovo, (4) Jakovo–Kormadin, (5) Vinča–Belo Brdo, (6) Starčevo–Grad, (7) Stubline, (8) Selevac, (9) Divostin, (10) Drenovac, (11) Crnokalačka Bara, (12) Blagotin, (13) Pločnik, (14) Belovode, (15) Rudna Glava, (16) Drobeta–Turnu Severin, (17) Muldava, (18) Nova Nadezhda, (19) Hauza–Kapitan Andreevo, and (20) Anzabegovo. (b) Outline of the territory occupied by the Late Neolithic Vinča culture communities.

Throughout the Neolithic period, subsistence in the central Balkans was based on animal husbandry, with some differences in species ratios between different regions and through time (Bökönyi 1988; Bulatović 2018; Dimitrijević 2020; Greenfield 1986, 2008; Orton 2008; Russell 1993). For example, at the site of Divostin, cattle was predominant in both the Early and the Late Neolithic period, followed by sheep, goats, domestic and wild pigs, red deer, dogs, and small numbers of other species (Bökönyi 1988). Wild animals are present in the faunal record in limited numbers. Red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) was in general the most frequently hunted animal, followed by roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*), aurochs (*Bos primigenius*), and wild pigs (*Sus scrofa*), although ratios vary from site to site. At the Early Neolithic sites situated in the Iron Gates region, hunted fauna is more frequent (Greenfield 2008).

A similar situation, with a prevalence of domestic species, can also be observed in neighbouring regions (e.g., Gorczyk and Karastoyanova 2017), and we may note the presence of fallow deer (*Dama dama*) in the Neolithic sites in present-day Bulgaria (Karastoyanova et al. 2020), otherwise rare or completely absent in the central Balkans (see Russell 1993 for details).

### 3. Deer and the Material Culture in the Neolithic

In this paper, three distinct species are encompassed under the term “deer”, namely, red deer (*Cervus elaphus*), roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*), and fallow deer (*Dama dama*) (Figures 3 and 4), represented in the faunal records in the Balkan area in different ratios (Bulatović 2018; Gorczyk and Karastoyanova 2017; Greenfield 1986; Orton 2008; Russell

1993). They are grouped together because they all have antlers as the most prominent characteristic (Figure 4), which, presumably, also played an important part in both their economic and symbolic value. Furthermore, it is not always possible to distinguish the species in case of worked antlers or stylised clay figurines. Whether prehistoric communities distinguished them or not, we have no evidence; one must keep in mind, however, that “folk taxonomy” often has its own criteria (cf. Marciniak 2005), and it seems plausible that prehistoric communities considered these species linked.



**Figure 3.** Red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) stag with antlers (Source: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4b/Cervus\\_elaphus\\_Luc\\_Viatour\\_6.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4b/Cervus_elaphus_Luc_Viatour_6.jpg), accessed on 29 February 2024).



**Figure 4.** Antlers of fallow deer (*Dama dama*) collected in the woods and placed in the garden as decoration, Dugi otok, Croatia (Photo: Selena Vitezović).

We may distinguish a twofold appearance of deer in the material culture in the Neolithic—the first one concerns the usage of skeletal elements of deer, either for the

production of diverse objects, or their placement in ritual deposits, and the second one concerns the representations of deer, as decorations on ceramic vessels or as self-standing figurines made from clay.

### 3.1. Use of Skeletal Elements for Non-Utilitarian Items

The selection of raw—including osseous—materials for artefact production among prehistoric communities was directed by their availability and physical traits, but cultural choices also played a rather important role (see [Choyke 2013](#); [Lemonnier 1992](#); [Vitezović 2013a](#)). The production of artefacts from osseous raw materials reflects both the environment and how given communities perceived and interacted with that environment, and the raw material selection represents the cultural attitude towards a given animal ([Choyke 2003](#)).

Skeletal elements of deer were widely used for the production of diverse objects in prehistory— their long bones (especially metapodial), astragals, or other bones, and in particular their antlers (e.g., [Vitezović 2014, 2017](#)). Antlers were a very valued raw material in numerous prehistoric cultures, since their mechanical and physical properties, as well as their availability, made them a very convenient raw material for the production of diverse items ([Christensen 2004](#))—weapons (such as projectile points, harpoons) (e.g., [Guthrie 1983](#)), heavy duty tools (axes, hammer-axes, chisels) (e.g., [Schibler 2013](#); [Vitezović 2014, 2017](#)), and a range of non-utilitarian items (e.g., [Zhilin 2021](#)), including decorative items.

The selection of raw materials for making personal ornaments in particular was by no means random or arbitrary. Personal ornaments did not have a purely decorative purpose; instead, they were often a symbol of status and identity (group or individual); they may have had a certain value, either symbolic or monetary value (or both); they may have also served as amulets and had an apotropaic, prophylactic, curative, or lustrative role, etc. Raw material selection, therefore, was often focused on those that were very valued and/or were assigned a certain symbolic significance ([Vitezović 2012](#)). Value may be related to their properties—for example, raw materials that were rare, exotic, or difficult to obtain, but also materials of a certain colour, that are found at specific places, etc. Osseous raw materials may have been valued because of their bright white colour (cf. [Antonović et al. 2018](#); [Luik 2007](#); [Vitezović 2012](#)), but also because of their origin from specific animal species ([Choyke 2003, 2010](#); [Pickenpaugh 1997](#)). At the same time, a specific, deliberate preference for the skeletal elements of roe deer, red deer, and fallow deer for non-utilitarian items, especially for personal ornaments, reflects the cultural attitude towards these animals.

#### 3.1.1. The Early Neolithic

Within the Starčevo–Körös–Criş settlements, bones from roe or red deer were only occasionally used for artefact production, whereas antlers were relatively frequent in the Starčevo and Criş areas, but quite rare within the Körös culture (cf. [Vitezović 2014](#) for the Starčevo sites; [Beldiman 2007](#); [Beldiman and Sztancs 2011](#) for the Criş sites; [Makkay 1990](#); [Tóth 2013](#) for Körös sites).

Non-utilitarian items included personal ornaments, mainly different pendants, used as parts of composite jewellery, or were sewn onto the clothes. Deer skeletal elements that were used for non-utilitarian items include antlers and teeth; it was not possible to determine whether bones from roe or red deer were used; due to the heavy modification of bones used for ornaments, it was not possible to identify the species ([Vitezović 2012](#)).

Red deer teeth were used for pendants. Residual canines of red deer have a specific, teardrop shape, and were frequently used for pendants already in the Palaeolithic period, modified simply by adding a perforation ([Taborin 2004](#)). Furthermore, in later prehistoric times, imitations of red deer canines in other materials may be encountered rather often (see [Choyke 2001](#) for more details). At the site of Divostin in central Serbia, one perforated red deer canine was found, as well as one bone imitation ([Vitezović 2012](#), pp. 219–20, fig. 6) (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Red deer canine modified into pendant (left), and bone imitation of red deer canine pendant (right), Divostin (Photo: Selena Vitezović).

Antlers were also used for pendants; one elongated, rectangular pendant made from a red deer antler segment was discovered at the site of Starčevo–Grad, situated in the southern Banat region (Vitezović 2012, p. 220, fig. 1). One fragmented pendant or belt hook made from an antler was found at the Criș culture site of Miercurea Sibiului–Petriș (Beldiman and Sztancs 2011, p. 59, fig. 2/17).

Another type of ornaments from antlers are items in the shape of (open) bracelets. They were made from the pearly part from the base of shed antlers. One fragmented bracelet was discovered at the site of Drenovac in central Serbia (Vitezović 2012, p. 220, fig. 3) (Figure 6). In Romania, several such bracelets were found—two fragmented bracelets were noted at the site of Trestiana, and another two at the site of Drobeta–Turnu Severin (Beldiman 2007; Beldiman and Sztancs 2011, p. 65, fig. 8/20–23). At the site of Grădinile–Islaz, one bracelet and one possible preform were discovered, while from the site of Cârcea–Hanuri comes one fragmented bracelet with the end shaped like the head of some animal, most likely a herbivore (Beldiman 2007; Beldiman and Sztancs 2011, pp. 65–66, fig. 8/19, 28–30).



**Figure 6.** Fragmented antler bracelet, Drenovac (Photo: Selena Vitezović).

With a somewhat smaller diameter, a ring-shaped ornament made from the antler of a red or a fallow deer was discovered at the site of Nova Nadezhda, situated in eastern Bulgaria (Vitezović et al. 2017).

These ornaments are not frequent, suggesting that they were not discarded easily but entered the archaeological context only when lost or completely unusable; also, they are usually very worn or fragmented, suggesting that they were used for a long time.

### 3.1.2. The Late Neolithic

Red deer canines continued to be in use in the Late Neolithic. One perforated red deer tooth was discovered at the site of Belovode, in north-eastern Serbia (Vitezović 2021a, p. 219) (Figure 7), and at least one was reported from the site of Vinča–Belo Brdo (a present-day suburb of Belgrade) (Ignjatović 2008, p. 277). At the site of Selevac, situated near Smederevska Palanka, in central Serbia, one antler pendant that copies the shape of the red deer canine was found (Russell 1990, pl. 14.7a). In the vicinity of the site of Pločnik, near Prokuplje in southern Serbia, an interesting stray find was discovered, presumably associated with the nearby Late Neolithic settlement—a large number of ornamental items, consisting of numerous marine shell beads, as well as 33 perforated red deer canines (Jocić 2004, p. 127).



**Figure 7.** Pendant from red deer canine, Belovode (Photo: Selena Vitezović).

Other ornaments include antler pendants of diverse shapes. At the site of Selevac, one antler ornament with four preserved symmetrical perforations and another two broken perforations was noted, most likely some sort of an appliqué (Russell 1990, 14.9b). Another ornament was ring-shaped (i.e., oval, with a large perforation), with a thin protrusion with denticulated edges, and it was interpreted as a possible part of a hook-and-eye belt buckle (Russell 1990, pl. 14.3d). One elongated, rectangular-shape pendant was discovered at the site of Vitkovo in central Serbia; it has a broken perforation in the upper part and two parallel notches, and was carefully burnished (Vitezović 2013b, p. 12, pl. I). From the site of Vinča–Belo Brdo comes one oval-shaped antler pendant (Ignjatović 2008, p. 277).

Particularly interesting is the find of a fragmented non-utilitarian item made from a red deer antler tine discovered at the site of Pločnik (Vitezović 2021b, pp. 82–83, fig. 61) (Figure 8). The tine was longitudinally cut and the object in question was made from one longitudinal half. It was very finely made; it was carefully cut and the entire outer surface was also carefully burnished in order to remove all natural roughness of the antler. Both ends are broken, and the object is dark in colour from exposure to fire (accidental or on purpose?). The outer surface has incised decorations consisting of diagonal and straight lines, that form a geometric pattern. The presence of decorations on antler and bone items is exceedingly rare in the Vinča culture, thus making this object even more special. The

function of this object is unclear; perhaps it was part of a decoration on some composite object.



**Figure 8.** Antler artefact with incised decoration, Pločnik (Photo: Selena Vitezović).

Ornamental items from the Late Neolithic, similar to those from the Early Neolithic period, were also worn, used for a long time, often fragmented, and were not discarded easily.

Nerissa Russell (1993, p. 136) mentioned one possible frontlet found at the site of Opovo, situated in the Banat region. Frontlets are specific types of artefacts, consisting of the uppermost segment of the skull of a red deer, with the antlers, and they were modified so that they could, presumably, be used as headgear, during rituals or festivals. They were found on several Mesolithic sites in different parts of Europe (Conneller 2004; Wild et al. 2020).

The frontlet from Opovo consisted of frontal and parietal bones and bases of antlers, and was found just outside house no. 5. Nerissa Russell also noted that the frontlet was quite weathered, unlike other bones found in the same excavation unit, and concluded that the antlers have eroded away through exposure, and were most likely hung outside house no. 5 or nearby. Her interpretation is that this may have been a trophy, a visible reminder of a feast, a totemic display, or part of a costume (Russell 1993, p. 137). She also noted a similar piece at the site of At near Vršac (Russell 1993, pp. 136–37).

From the site of Hauza–Kapitan Andreevo, situated in south-eastern Bulgaria, near the town of Svilengrad, an interesting assemblage of osseous artefacts was recovered, and included mainly carefully made, fine daily tools and ornaments.<sup>2</sup> In this assemblage, there were several diverse tools produced from fallow deer skeletal elements, including numerous antler items. Particularly interesting are five phalanges from roe deer, modified by means of abrasion into figurine-shaped objects (Figure 9). Four of them are vertically drilled in the proximal part, and three of them transversally perforated in the distal part. They were not utilitarian items, i.e., they do not have an active distal part; however, they are rather enigmatic objects. The presence of perforations suggests that they may have been suspended somewhere, but not all of them have perforations, and also they were rather large for personal ornaments. Furthermore, they resemble figures, but whether these may be considered as figural presentations, or these items had an ornamental function and this resemblance was secondary or entirely unintentional, it is not clear. Perhaps they were intended to be displayed at some specific area of the house or some other building, and perforations served to facilitate their exhibiting.

Similar figurine-shaped items made by modifying phalanges from different animal species are known from sites in Anatolia (e.g., Campana and Crabtree 2018).



**Figure 9.** Modified phalanges, Hauza–Kapitan Andreevo (Photo: Selena Vitezović).

### 3.2. Deer in Ritual Deposits

Defining ritual deposits (i.e., special, intentional deposits with exclusively symbolic meaning) in the archaeological record is often very difficult. The terms “animal burial” or “animal deposition” are usually used for animals whose body—complete or just part of it—was arranged anatomically, without traces of consumption, and intentionally put in a given place (such as a pit, human grave, etc.) (see [Szmyt 2006](#), p. 2). However, the unambiguous identification of such deposits is not always possible, such as when the deposit is disturbed by later human activities, when it is poorly preserved, etc. There is only limited evidence for special (ritual) deposits in the Balkan Neolithic.

#### 3.2.1. The Early Neolithic

Within the Starčevo culture, one possible special deposit was discovered at the site of Blagotin (near Trstenik, central Serbia). The head of a red deer was discovered within one pit, carefully placed at its bottom ([Stanković and Leković 1993](#); [Nikolić and Zečević 2001](#), p. 6).

Pits containing antlers (or horns) are reported from the site of Donja Branjevina, situated in the Vojvodina region ([Karmanski 2005](#), p. 40); however, it is not certain if these represent ritual depositions or simple caches of raw materials.

#### 3.2.2. The Late Neolithic

There are occasional mentions of a higher frequency of red deer cranial elements at some of the Vinča culture settlements, especially antlers and mandibles in pits ([Orton 2008](#), p. 302), and this might represent a parallel with aurochs/cattle skulls and horn cores ([Orton 2008](#), p. 302). However, antler deposits may also represent raw material caches. At the site of Hauza–Kapitan Andreevo, certain concentrations of fallow deer antlers were also noted, but it is more likely that they were simply a storage place.

A specific type of ritual deposit (ritual placements) of skeletal elements are peculiar artefacts usually labelled as *bucrania*.<sup>3</sup> These are either animal heads with horns/antlers (predominantly *Bos*, hence the name *bukranion*) modelled from clay, or skull and horn cores/antler segments with additional modelling by clay. Usually, they are interpreted as wall decorations, either in the house interiors, or on the outside walls. *Bucrania* are known from the Neolithic sites in south-western Asia, such as Çatal Höyük ([Mellaart 1967](#)).

*Bucrania* were also noted at some of the Vinča culture settlements. As already mentioned, *bucrania* are predominantly representations of *Bos* (domestic cattle or aurochs); however, there are occurrences of red deer *bucrania*. At the site of Gomolava, situated in the Srem region, one such *bukranion* that represents a deer was discovered. However, very little information is published on this find, and it is only briefly mentioned in the excavation report as a “bucranion with burnt deer antlers, made from daub”, found in the rubble

of a Neolithic house (Nadž 1957, p. 404). Another such *bucranion* was reported from the site of Stubline, located near Obrenovac, where several *bucrania* were discovered in recent excavations (see Spasić 2015 for full details). Within house 1/2010, two *bucrania* were found, placed near the oven, one on each side. They were made from clay and animal skeletal elements—the one on the left side had cattle horns, and the one on the right side had plastically modelled eyes and fragmented antlers of a red deer (Spasić 2015, pp. 88, 198–99).

#### 4. Deer in Material Culture

Figurines, including zoomorphic representations, were relatively frequent in the Neolithic period (cf. Garašanin 1979; see also Letica 1988; Petrović et al. 2009). However, identifying the animal that is represented is often difficult and ambiguous, due to the stylised imagery and also the fragmented state of the figurines.

As representations of deer, we may encounter self-standing clay figurines, vessels that have a zoomorphic shape, zoomorphic decorative details, or decorations on the vessel representing deer.

##### 4.1. Zoomorphic Clay Figurines

###### 4.1.1. The Early Neolithic

Among the zoomorphic figurines found within Starčevo culture sites, only a few have been identified as deer representations thus far. From the site of Banja, in the vicinity of Arandjelovac (central Serbia), comes one fragment of a deer head (Bogdanović 1988, p. 70) (Figure 10). At the site of Galovo, situated in eastern Croatia, one figurine, interpreted as a doe, was discovered. This figurine was found within a pit-dwelling, almost completely preserved, decorated with zigzag incised motifs (Minichreiter 2007, pp. 141–42). Another deer figurine is mentioned from the site of Selci Đakovački–Kaznica–Rutak, also in eastern Croatia (Hršak 2014, p. 47).

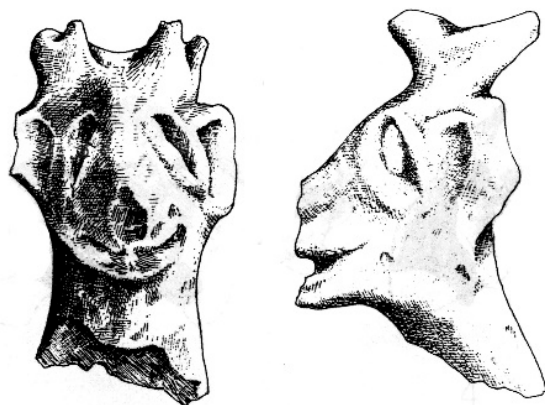


Figure 10. Head of a deer figurine, Banja (Bogdanović 1988).

Figurines that probably represent red deer were noted at the Körös site of Endröd 3/45 in Hungary (Makkay 2007, p. 190).

In Northern Macedonia, deer figurines were identified on several sites. Among several zoomorphic figurines recovered at the site of Anzabegovo, one fragmented head was interpreted as a deer head (Gimbutas 1976, p. 214, fig. 153). Several deer figurines come from the site of Veluška Tumba, situated near the town of Bitola. One figurine was found in excavations carried out in the 1970s. This figurine is fragmented; only the head with the antlers and neck is preserved. It was finely modelled, with an elongated muzzle, almond-shaped eyes, cylindrical neck, modelled ears, and modelled antlers, and it also has traces of white paint (Simoska and Sanev 1975, pp. 62–64, t. XII, XXI). These authors also consider figurines from the nearby site of Porodin to be deer representations (Simoska and Sanev 1975, pp. 62–64). Excavations initiated in the 21st century at Veluška Tumba yielded additional fragments of deer heads with similar traits—elongated heads with

conical muzzles and almond-shaped eyes. They were found within buildings 1 and 14. It is possible that these were not self-standing figurines, but protomes on clay altars (Naumov 2022, p. 86).

#### 4.1.2. The Late Neolithic

Diverse and abundant clay figurines are a particular trait of the Vinča culture. They were frequent at all sites, reaching up to several hundred at some of the sites (see, among others, Kuzmanović Cvetković 2017; Letica 1988; Petrović et al. 2009; Vasić 1936). Anthropomorphic figurines prevail, but there are also finds of hybrid and zoomorphic figurines. Among zoomorphic representations, it is not always possible to identify the animal represented, even among the completely preserved specimens, since the representations are often highly stylised. It seems that oxen prevail—or they were the easiest to identify—but other animals were also identified, such as dog, sheep, goats, birds, bears, small animals such as turtles (Letica 1988; Petrović et al. 2009; Spasić 2015), and also several deer representations (Spasić 2015, pp. 88–90). Deer are usually identified by the presence of antlers and their morphology; hence, it is possible that some of the fragmented figurines were also deer representations.

Very interesting are zoomorphic figurines discovered at the sites of Jakovo–Kormadin, in a present-day suburb of Belgrade, and Crnokalačka Bara, near Kruševac. The zoomorphic figurine from Jakovo (Figure 11) is dark-greyish to black in colour, and has an elongated head and neck, with a modelled muzzle, ears, and antlers (Petrović et al. 2009, p. 130; Spasić 2015). Very similar to this one is the figurine from the site of Crnokalačka Bara, with an elongated neck, but without antlers, and it perhaps represents a doe (Tasić and Tomić 1969, p. 33).



**Figure 11.** Head of a deer figurine, Jakovo–Kormadin (Spasić 2015).

At the site of Divostin, among several zoomorphic figurines, predominantly representing oxen, one fragmented animal head with horns/antlers may represent a deer (Letica 1988, pl. 7.6l). Fragmented figurines possibly representing deer were also reported from the sites of Jaričište and Belovode (Spasić 2015, t. 38/1, 2).

Two possible deer figurines were found at the site of Pločnik, both fragmented—only their heads are preserved. The first one is of a greyish colour, and has eyes, muzzle, and antlers depicted, and it also has incised decorations below the muzzle (Figure 12). The other one is reddish in colour, and the muzzle has a horizontal perforation (Figure 13) (Kuzmanović Cvetković 2017, pp. 63–64).



**Figure 12.** Head of a deer figurine, Pločnik (dim. 73 × 100 mm) (Kuzmanović Cvetković 2017).

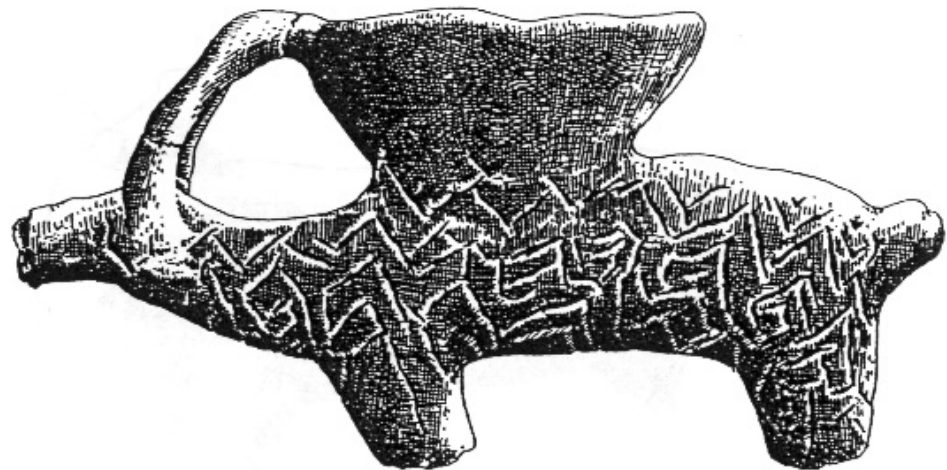


**Figure 13.** Head of a deer figurine, Pločnik (dim. 39 × 45 × 41 mm) (Kuzmanović Cvetković 2017).

#### 4.2. Other Representations of Deer

##### 4.2.1. The Early Neolithic

Zoomorphic vessels were in general rare in the Early Neolithic, thus making the deer representations even more interesting. At the site of Donja Branjevina, one zoomorphic vessel or altar was found, in a shape of an animal with a container on its back (Figure 14). The animal has prominent, elongated antlers, and was interpreted as a representation of either a red deer or a chamois (Karmanski 2005, p. 39, fig. 30); however, considering the finding place (Donja Branjevina is located in the Pannonian plain), this animal most likely represents a red deer.



**Figure 14.** Zoomorphic vessel, Donja Branjevina (Karmanski 2005).

At the Körös culture site of Csépa, one pot was found with a representation of a deer on its central part, with prominent antlers (Kutzián 1947, t. II/1). Additional fragmented representations of deer antlers were noted in Körös culture pottery (Kutzián 1947, t. XVII, XX).

One extraordinary zoomorphic vessel comes from the Early Neolithic (Karanovo I) site of Muldava in Bulgaria (Figure 15). It is finely made, reddish in colour, and with a white painted decoration; at one end, there is a modelled deer head with antlers and an elongated neck, and it has a receptacle in the central part (Detev 1968, fig. 25; see also Jungsteinzeit in Bulgarien 1981, pp. 42–43).



**Figure 15.** Zoomorphic vessel, Muldava (dim. 54 cm) (Jungsteinzeit in Bulgarien 1981).

#### 4.2.2. The Late Neolithic

Ceramic artefacts labelled as altars—in a shape of a three- or four-legged vessel with a flat or concave receptacle—were also one of the characteristic traits of the material culture of Vinča communities. These altars often had zoomorphic details, namely, animal heads as protomes, and the legs were sometimes shaped to imitate animal legs.

At the site of Rudna Glava, in eastern Serbia, which was a copper mine exploited by Vinča culture communities, two altars have been found with protomes shaped as deer heads (Jovanović 1985, pp. 46–51). One altar has four legs and a shallow, rectangular bowl, and one of the sides has a massive deer head with large antlers, connected with

the bowl part of the altar. The deer neck is decorated with incised lines, and the entire object is decorated with meander-shaped motifs, incised and filled with red and black paint (Jovanović 1985, pp. 46–47). The second altar also has four legs and a shallow, rectangular bowl, and two deer heads at opposite sides; again, with large antlers connected with the bowl-part (Figure 16). The altar is decorated with incised lines and meanders, and has traces of white paint (Jovanović 1985, p. 51).



**Figure 16.** Altar with zoomorphic heads, Rudna Glava (100 × 140 × 130 mm) (courtesy of Goran Janjić).

Very similar to these altars is one fragmented altar found at the site of Gradac; only the zoomorphic head with antlers is preserved (Stalio 1972, 33, t. XXXI/207). This altar was also decorated with incised geometric motifs and has traces of white paint.

## 5. Discussion

Cervids had a prominent role in the symbolic realms of diverse prehistoric communities in Europe in pre-Neolithic times, and to understand better the representations and roles of deer during the Neolithic, it is useful to provide here a few words about the preceding Mesolithic period. As evidence for a ritual and symbolic role of deer in archaeological records, findings of so-called frontlets may be mentioned, noted in several Mesolithic sites across Europe (Conneller 2004; Wild et al. 2020), alongside non-utilitarian objects made from elk antlers, such as a zoomorphic staff head from the site of Ivanovskoye 7 (Zhilin 2021), pendants from elk teeth (Jonuks and Rannamäe 2018), and many more.

Red deer and roe deer had a notable place in the symbolic world of the Mesolithic communities that inhabited the Iron Gates area (Radovanović 1996; Vitezović 2021c). Several non-utilitarian artefacts made from red and roe deer antlers with incised geometric motifs were found at the sites of Vlasac, Icoana, Schela Cladovei, Cuina Turcului, and Ostrovul Banului. Several artefacts found at Icoana had incised lines organised into zigzag lines, diagonal rows of incised lines, or vertical bands with incised lines, while motifs on artefacts from Cuina Turcului had vertical parallel and wavy lines (Boroneanţ 1969, 1970). At Vlasac, one roe deer antler with an incised net motif was discovered (Srejić and Letica 1978, t. LXX).

Furthermore, skeletal elements of deer were found within burials; they included both artefacts and simple skeletal elements. The most interesting is grave no. 7a from Lepenski Vir, in which a skeleton of a man and the skull of an elderly woman were buried. Within this grave, a large bovid and a red deer skull with large antlers were also placed (Radovanović 1996, p. 180). In three houses at Lepenski Vir, houses no. 23, 96, and 104, antlers were placed across the hearth, presumably at the moment of house abandonment (Srejić 1969, pp. 132–46; Radovanović 1996). At the site of Hajdučka Vodenica, a massive red deer antler

was placed at the entrance of a burial chamber containing several inhumations (Jovanović 1984, p. 308; Borić 2002, pp. 102–3).

The symbolic role and meaning of deer are difficult to interpret. Some authors argued that because of the seasonal shedding and re-growth of the antlers, they were a symbol of life cycles and renewal (Srejović 1955). In some communities, the hunting of deer was a social activity, and even a rite of passage for adolescent males (Trantalidou and Masseti 2015). However, there is more evidence that the symbolic role of deer was related to the territory and landscape. For example, among the Iron Age communities in Western Europe, red deer were a liminal category between the living and the supernatural worlds, and possibly also signified power and wealth (Morris 2005). We may argue that deer had similar significance throughout the Neolithic period in the central Balkans. The presence of deer skeletal elements linked to houses (*bucrania*, ritual deposits, and the finding of a frontlet at Opovo) suggests that they were connected with territoriality, and/or had a role as the protector of the house/home.

In addition, the findings of altars with deer heads discovered at the copper mine of Rudna Glava perhaps suggest the possibility of deer as animals that connects different worlds, and/or their prophylactic, apotropaic character. The usage of skeletal elements of deer for non-utilitarian objects and personal ornaments also suggests prophylactic, apotropaic significance, as well as wealth and prestige (see also Vitezović 2012, 2015). Enigmatic items from the Kapitan Andreevo site, made from roe deer phalanges, perhaps also had some sort of protective character, and were used as some kind of amulet, with a curative and/or lustrative role. Overall, the prophylactic, apotropaic character of deer seems to have been present in several Neolithic communities.

## 6. Conclusions

Within the agricultural Neolithic communities of the Balkans, diverse animal species had an important place in symbolic and ritual life, including cattle, birds, and others. Deer had a reduced place in economy, but were still important, as a source of food and raw materials. Their symbolic role and value were probably modified in comparison with the Mesolithic period, and perhaps they became less important than some other species, such as cattle, but they retained some of their importance and symbolic value throughout the Early and the Late Neolithic period. Evidence such as the presence of deer skeletal elements in relation to house areas, along with the usage of deer imagery and ornaments from deer skeletal elements, suggests that a prophylactic, apotropaic significance was attributed to deer, and perhaps they also had a role in connecting different worlds.

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**Data Availability Statement:** All the data included in this paper are available in the cited references, with the exception of the finding from the site of Hauza–Kapitan Andreevo; an illustration of the mentioned finding is included in the paper, while the publication of the entire assemblage is forthcoming.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This paper intended to provide an overview of evidence as comprehensive as possible; however, as numerous findings from the Neolithic period in the Balkan area are not fully published, it is probable that the evidence presented here is not exhaustive.
- <sup>2</sup> Unpublished, analysed by the author.
- <sup>3</sup> In this paper, the term is used in the widest sense, and includes all the findings labelled by researchers as *bucrania*: animal skulls plastered with clay, as well as skulls modelled entirely from clay.

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